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# Ah What Riddles these Women be!



1. Poetry, American.

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Young





H, WHAT RIDDLES  
THESE WOMEN BE!



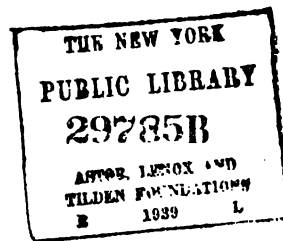
# AH, WHAT RIDDLES THESE WOMEN BE!

By  
WILLIAM YOUNG



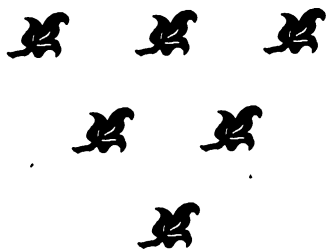
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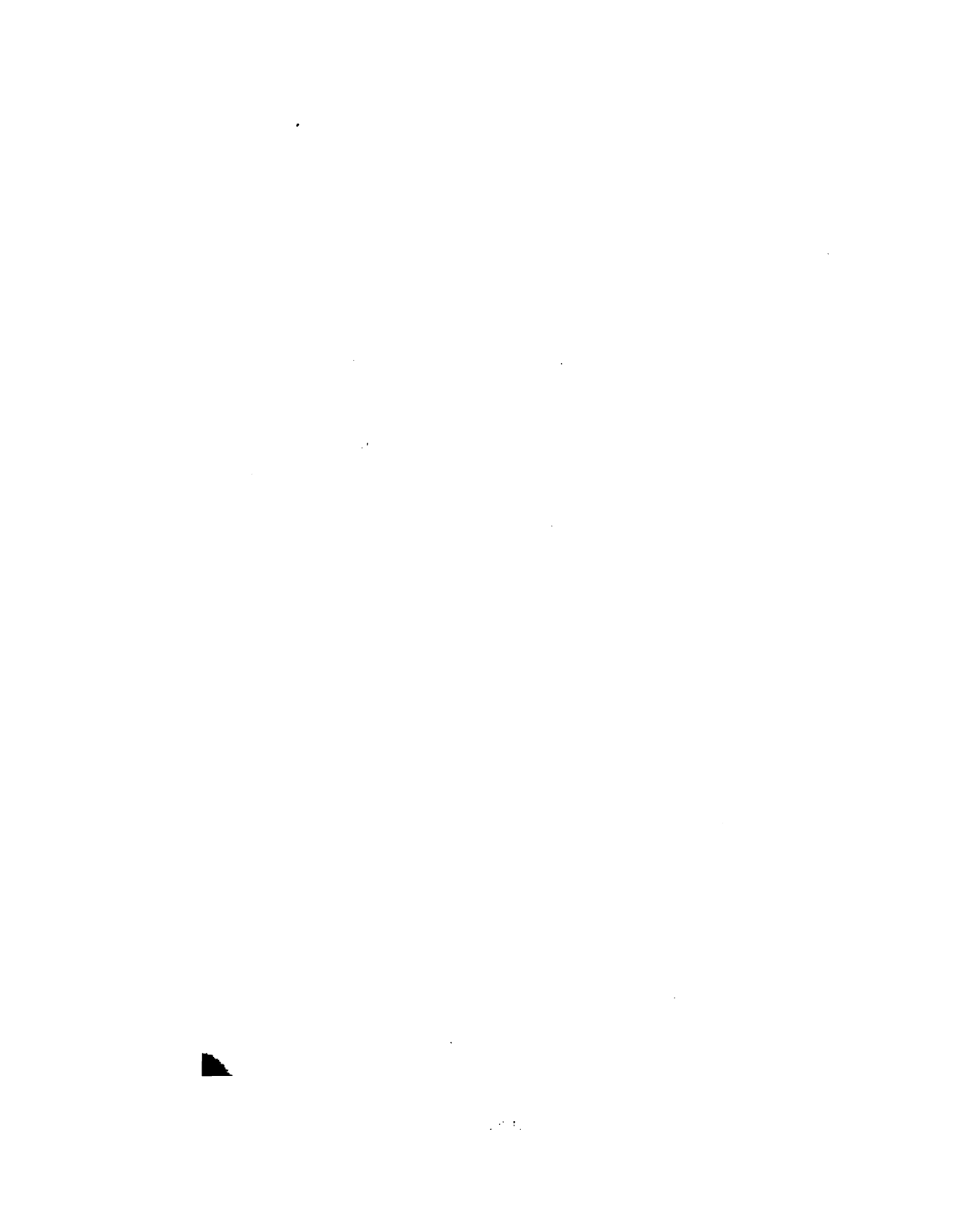




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By  
Robert Howard Russell

WOL 19 FEB 36





## **“Ah, What Riddles These Women Be!”**

### **PROEM**



ENMARK'S daughter was wooed and won  
By Sigurd, the Jarl of Orkney's son;  
And the ocean-rovers of West and East  
Turned their prow to the wedding feast.

Kings, and Jarls, of the East and the West—  
Vikings, out of the Jomsborg nest—  
Norse marauder, and pirate Dane—  
Lords of the mainland and the main—  
Lords of the capes, and lords of the isles—  
Storming over the trackless miles,  
Bird-like, clangorous, wing and wing—  
Storming, and wrangling, and ravening  
In many a mid-sea fray, they came;  
And as birds to the beacon's flame  
Cluster out of the windy dark,  
So, on banner and battle-mark,  
Kite, and falcon, and sea-mew, there,  
Drooped their plumes in the torches' glare—  
Hung, and hover'd, as if in dread  
Of the great War-Raven overhead.  
—And there, while the harpers harp'd and sang,  
And the sounding rafters above them rang,  
The meats were hewn, and the mead was pour'd,  
Till the ruddy faces above the board

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Glow'd and gloom'd in the fitful light,  
As over a city sacked by night,  
And the trenchers of beaten silver lay  
Clash'd together, and cast away.

Then, when the maws were glutt'd all,  
Rang, on a sudden, the Berserk call,  
And the war-horns answer'd with raucous roar.  
—Swift as Loki, over the floor  
Flash'd a youth, from whose nimble hands  
Leap'd, and glitter'd in air, the brands,  
That oft and oft through the arrows' hail  
Had riven the Saxon and Southron mail—  
Leap'd, and glitter'd, and wheel'd, and cross'd;  
And ever were caught by their hilts and toss'd  
In curves of splendor; and downward drew,  
Meteor-like, and leap'd anew.

—Thus was danced to its flaming close  
The Dance of Swords; and a strain arose,  
Alien, amorous—born afar,  
Under the Southland's fervid star,  
Where the wassail-cup of the Aesir spills,  
Nightly, over the blushing hills,  
And the brown elf-maidens trip and twine,  
Wreath'd with the purple-cluster'd vine—  
A dream of the youth and the wanderings  
Of the hoary harper who swept the strings.  
Alien, amorous, sweet, and strange—



With many a liquid lapse and change!  
Like to the lure of a mating bird,  
Passion-throated! And they that heard,  
Pierced with its poignant thrill, were fain  
To murmur the rhythmic, low refrain.  
Rhythmic, rapturous, full, and strong,  
Swell'd the chords; and the swaying throng  
Rose on the eddying waves of sound,  
Soft eyes brimming, and hair unbound—  
Rose, and mated, and clasped, and swung,  
To the trancing cadence of harp and tongue—  
Dame and warrior, maid and page.  
—Ah! but chill is the blood of age—  
Woful sluggish, and wintry chill;  
And three at the board-side linger'd still:—  
Danish Harald, and Svein the Gray,  
And Skarli—mighty at feast and fray,  
In the days of Harald of Norroway.

Grim sea-harriers, they! Not one  
Of the three but had looked on the midnight sun,  
And many a fearsome sight had seen  
The upper and nether deeps between.  
Now, on the high-seats perched aside,  
Mute, they gazed on the rainbow tide  
Of the revel, surging—around, about—  
And the white arms tossing above the rout.  
Long they gazed, in the taper's shine,





Heavy-lidded, and gave no sign.—  
For haply each in his fancy heard,  
In the chanted song, or the spoken word,  
Or the rippling laugh, as it seemed, the tone  
Of another voice that he once had known—  
Heard, and listen'd again to hear—  
Or a face of the many drifting near,  
Wraith-like, out of the days gone by,  
Smote itself on his dreaming eye:  
Till up spake Skarli—the eldest, he—  
Sighing, and speaking for all the three,  
“Ah! what riddles these women be!”

Then, like a fount that wakes and flows,  
Under the glacier's hoary snows,  
When the South Wind calls, and the copses ring,  
In the vale beneath, to the pipes of Spring,  
Flow'd his speech, in a stream that well'd,  
Feeble at first, from the deeps of eld—  
Well'd, and babbled, and waxed to flood.  
His cold eye quicken'd, the mantling blood  
Showed in his lean cheek, weather-tann'd,  
And furrow'd, like to the brown sea-sand;  
And his life's low sun, as he told his tale,  
On the high-seats, over the foaming ale,  
Warm'd him again, with the crimson ray  
That flashes at morn—and at close of day.



## THE SAGA OF SKARLI THE STRONG



EIF the Wise, on a night of strife,  
Saved a maid, whom he took to wife—  
Helga, daughter of Ulf the Red,  
And a sea-witch mother—or so 'twas said.

“Fair she was, as a dream of sin!  
Smooth, and supple, and white of skin!—  
So wondrous fair, and so lustrous white,  
That the gleam of her beauty abashed the sight!  
But dusk, her hair; and with amber glow,  
As of a fire that slumbers low,  
Her eyes look'd forth from the constant shade,  
That her long, dark, languorous lashes made.—  
I thought of the house-cat's sleepy purr,  
And swift strength under the velvet fur,  
Soft to stroke, as I look'd at her.

“Leif the Wise, by the ancient rule,  
Once he was married was Leif the Fool:—  
Sail'd no more on the far foray;  
Shunn'd his fellows; and night and day  
Guarded his treasure with jealous greed:  
Frown'd, if ever an eye took heed  
Of her lissome grace, as she moved and swayed,  
In her clinging, undulous robes arrayed,  
Or sat at feast—where she seldom came—



Letting her keen eyes' lambent flame  
Play and flicker about the board.  
—Once it happ'd, to the Folden fjord,  
As we sat at the high Spring Festival,  
Came a Lapp, that was Harald's thrall—  
A warlock, born with the gift to see  
The past, and all that was yet to be.  
And the secret wish, he was famed to read;  
And the thought that runneth before the deed.  
So we had him before us; and half in jest,  
And half with an awe that none confess'd,  
Late, when the tapers were flaring dim,  
Making merry, we question'd him.  
'Tell me, thou swart-faced Troll,' quoth I,  
'What is my thought?' And he made reply,  
'Thou thinkest O Jarl, that the fairest prize  
Of the Aesir hath fallen to Leif the Wise;  
And thou thinkest, as thou art Skarli the Strong,  
That unto thee should the prize belong.'

"Hush'd, as after a thunder-blast,  
The great hall gaped; and I sat aghast,  
Shaping my lips to 'Thou lying knave!'  
But the words rang hollow. A rosy wave,  
As swift to come, and as swift to go,  
As the North Light, flooded the bosom's snow  
And the face of Helga; and ere it died,  
Her eye, with a single flash aside,



Spake with mine—and at once I knew  
That the words of the warlock imp were true.

“Eyeing me there, with his hellish art,  
He had cleft the core of my inmost heart,  
And unto the sight of all laid bare  
What scarcely myself had dream’d was there—  
A long-pent, smouldering, deep desire,  
That now upleap’d like a raging fire;  
And rife, and surging through all my frame,  
It kindled my very blood to flame—  
So fiercely it lusted and long’d for her.  
—But I heard about me the buzz and stir  
Of the loosen’d tongues; and above the crowd,  
Saw, where it loom’d like a thunder-cloud,  
The scowl of Leif; and again, ‘Thou knave,  
Thou liest,’ I cried to the Lapp; and drave  
My goblet full at his grinning face.—  
And lo! there was nothing but empty space.

“Of all that follow’d—the pale affright,  
The stealing looks, and the silent flight  
Of the sober’d guests, till the last had flown—  
Nought I heeded but this alone:—  
That the arm of Leif had enclasp’d her waist,  
And drooping over it, lily-faced,  
She seem’d like a victim borne away  
By a hated tyrant, to be his prey;





And my soul was drawn from out of my breast,  
To follow after, and seize and wrest  
The prize from his grasp—as the Lapp had said.  
—Pacing alone, till the dawn was red,  
As the caged wolf paces, I sought for flaw  
In the right, or the might of the churlish law  
That stay'd me from her; but none I found.  
His she was, and my hands were bound.  
Nor yet did the morning cure my ill.  
Nor the night that follow'd. In torment, still,  
And nursing my burning thoughts, I strode,  
As one who tramps on a weary road—  
A course that ever, when all is done,  
Ends where its travail and toil begun—  
And once, soft-footed, and like a thief,  
I stole by the darken'd house of Leif.

“Barred, and grated, it hugged its own;  
Breathing, it seem'd, from its every stone:—  
'Jarl thou art, and Skarli the Strong;  
But the Aesir abide, and their arms are long;  
And the ban of the law on thy strength is laid.  
Go thy ways, for a thing afraid,  
Thou skulking shadow!' And home I crept,  
Loathing myself, till I could have wept;  
And cursing myself, in my deep self-scorn:—  
'For any woman of woman born,  
Shall I play the fool? I am sick to death,  
But for a whiff of the salt sea's breath.'



“So I leap’d to ship; and with three-score sail,  
Forth I sallied: and bane and bale  
To the Jarl of Halogaland I bore;  
And stoop’d, and wasted the Bretland shore.  
Southward, as far as the Tempsa’s wave,  
Sire and dam to the sword I gave,  
And fired the thatch, and throttled the brood,  
And pillar’d the sky with smoke, and strew’d  
The land with ashes. Yet, none the less,  
My heart was heavy. A weariness  
Even of slaughter upon me grew;  
And the old-time yearning abode and drew.  
That one last look that her eye had sent  
Burn’d, and beckon’d, and ne’er was spent—  
Like a watch-light laid on a vessel’s track,  
Glow’d, and quiver’d, and wooed me back.

“So from my roving I turn’d again,  
Deep with the spoil of the Enskirmen;  
And pushing ahead with my swiftest prow—  
The Valkyr—stranded and rotting now,  
On the Selund shallows—I came at last,  
On a midnight sullen and overcast,  
To the Rocks of the Jotun, that north and south  
Stand, like fangs, at the harbor’s mouth.  
Loud I signal’d, and heard the loor  
Of the horns that answer’d, till hill and moor  
Blazed their welcome.—But all so black



Lower'd the night, and the crowding pack  
Of the sea-fog muster'd and hemmed us in  
With a reek so sodden that wing nor fin  
Might tempt the passage; and heaving o'er  
My deep-sea grapple, and chafing sore,  
I cast myself on the deck, and lay,  
Sleepless, waiting the break of day.

—Whether ye credit me or no,  
Thus it happ'd, and I tell it so.

—There as I lay, when the night was old,  
Praying for morn—while the Valkyr roll'd  
In the pitchy wallow, and only she  
And I were awake on the brooding sea—  
There as I lay, and with scheming brain  
Toss'd in the darkness, and strove in vain  
To turn my trouble—my every sense  
Wakeful as now, and my wits as tense  
As bow-strings—sudden, it seem'd, the spell  
Of a numbing horror upon me fell;  
And all as real, and all as near  
As now I see you, and touch you, here—  
Even as near, and as close at hand—  
I saw the Lapp by the bulwark stand!

“Light there was none, but the ghostly, dim  
Glow of the sea, that he brought with him.  
From face and garment it flicker'd pale;  
And I felt the springs of my being fail,



As I hearken'd again to his voice, that broke  
On the stillness, like to a raven's croak:—  
'Well hast thou done, from the over-sea  
To answer the summons I sent to thee,  
O mighty Jarl! But the Aesir wait  
Never for him that cometh late;  
And thy fairest fortune, while thou dost lie  
Here in the offing, doth pass thee by.'  
—Then, for I answer'd him not, but dumb  
Lay and awaited the word to come,  
Low he louted, and with a vile,  
Venomous leer of craft and guile,  
His secret into my ear he gave,  
As a knave might whisper a brother knave:—  
'This very night, on the ebbing tide,  
Leif the Wise, with his three-month's bride,  
And all his treasures, in jealous fear—  
For the fame of thy coming hath reach'd his ear—  
Steals away, through the mist to go  
To the Jarl of the Isles, thy dearest foe.  
"And say to Skarli the Strong," saith he,  
"That prize nor praise shall he have of me."'

"Deep in his chuckling throat he laugh'd;  
And the sound of his laughter seem'd to waft  
And bear him into the rayless gloom.—  
Stricken, as if with the bolt of doom,  
I saw him vanish, nor spake, nor stirred;





But lay in a helpless trance, and heard  
The tide's low wash, and the breathings deep  
Of my fellows, outstretch'd in their peaceful sleep;  
And the chill of the grave-mound o'er me ran.  
Here was an end of plot and plan.  
Fled! And fled to my dearest foe!  
—But there flash'd a thought:—Was it even so?  
Why then by the laws of the land and the brine,  
Traitor he was!—and his all was mine!  
Back from my heart, in a seething wave,  
The blood return'd, and my tongue that clave  
To my mouth's roof loosen'd; I leap'd, and cried;  
And quick upspringing on ev'ry side,  
Swarm'd my people—and man and lad  
Hail'd, and question'd, and thought me mad.  
But I told them nought, and I hushed their cries;  
For landward peering, with straining eyes,  
I saw by now that the morning flight  
Of the shafts of Baldur had seam'd the night  
With veins of fire.—The fog was roll'd,  
And sway'd, and shaken, and shot with gold:  
It broke—it lifted—and down the ways  
Of the shimmering wavelets, all ablaze,  
Swept on our vision the ship of Leif!  
—Past mistaking! The wing'd thief,  
The Sea-Mew! Swift as the light she came,  
Flitting, and flickering! Loud her name  
Burst from the lips of my staring crew,



As on she sped to the outer blue.—  
And again the warlock had spoken true!

“Then to the Valkyr I made my pray’r;  
Ripp’d the hatches; and straightway there  
All the plunder that cramm’d the hull  
Wide I cast to the gannet and gull.  
Sheer to the planking my decks I stripp’d;  
Piled my canvas aloft; and slipp’d  
My straining cable. The Sea-Mew, far,  
Saw, and whisking her nimble spar,  
She dipp’d, and doubled, and seem’d to rise,  
And fly, as only the sea-mew flies—  
Clipping the surge—and the chase was on.  
—Into the swirling tide-way drawn,  
Down the trough of the Skager Rack,  
Sheering, veering, from tack to tack,  
Led the quarry—in mid-stream now,  
And now by the foreland’s jutting brow,  
Low careening, and skirting hard  
Reef, and skerry, and skerry-guard;  
Till leaving the farthest land a-lee,  
In one long stretch to the open sea  
She spun her ribbon of foamy wake.—  
But ever the Valkyr, with hissing strake,  
And taut ropes singing, and wider spread  
Of pinion, follow’d, where’er she fled;  
Reach’d to windward, and lapp’d, and flung



The chase to leeward again, and swung  
Near, and nearer, and yet more near:  
Till with the valor that comes from fear,  
The Sea-Mew wheel'd in her flight, and threw  
Her wings aback, and her beak to view—  
Vengeful—crouching to meet the fray;  
And the Valkyr swoop'd—and at once we lay  
Lock'd, and lash'd, in the broad sea-way.

“Straight to the Sea-Mew's deck I sprang:  
Leif, to meet me! The axes rang;  
The broadswords batter'd on helm and shield;  
And through the press, as we sway'd and reel'd,  
The hot bolts hiss'd from the twanging string.  
—But hearken now to the strangest thing:—  
Wise, but weak, he was deem'd of men;  
But his strength was now as the strength of ten.  
Twice I shore through his iron crown,  
And twice he was up ere he was down.—  
Voiceless—deadly—smiting amain—  
Thews upstarting, with throe and strain—  
Black brows lower'd, in fell onslaught!  
And ever behind him, as we fought,  
I saw the face and the wind-blown hair  
Of Helga—ah! but the witch was fair!—  
Her wide eyes fix'd in a frozen stare.



**“Half of the Valkyr’s crew were sped;  
And over the Sea-Mew’s decks the dead  
Wash’d in the welter, and three to one  
Cumber’d the living. The noonday sun  
Shrunk, and redden’d, and little we wist.  
Little we reck’d of the thickening mist—  
The web of the great Sea-Spider, that wove  
Its coils about us—for still we strove:  
Strove, with never a glance to spare,  
When the thunder growl’d on the heated air:  
Nor took we note of the lessening light,  
Save that ghastrier on the sight,  
Corpse-like, coppery, grim to see,  
Were those that strove with us, knee to knee;  
Till on our fury a whirling, vast  
Darkness bellied.—And then—the blast!**

**“It smote—and the great sea under the blow  
Quail’d, and straight was a waste of snow.  
It smote again, and the deeps uprose;  
And the heavens lower’d; and friends and foes,  
In the stifling murk, as the tall masts bow’d,  
Clung together to sheet and shroud.  
A sputter of flame!—and the lashings broke.  
In spume, and vapor, and thunder-smoke,  
The Valkyr vanish’d; and, plank from plank,  
Rent and riven, the Sea-Mew sank.—  
And when the tempest had spit its wrath,**





Nought there was in its boiling path—  
Nought on the wide waste, near or far,  
But three, adrift on a drifting spar—  
We three, under the cloud-piled sky,  
Spared—and we knew not how or why—  
Leif, and the white sea-witch, and I.

“Over the spar she droop’d and lay,  
Eyes upstaring, and limbs asway—  
Half denuded, and deathly still—  
And her white limbs sway’d at the water’s will.  
Leif beside her, binding her fast,  
With a straining arm, to the splinter’d mast!—  
His set face streaming with blood and brine,  
And his glittering eyeballs fix’d on mine,  
With hate undying, and quenchless spleen,  
Over the woman outstretch’d between!

“Nought we utter’d—nor curse, nor pray’r—  
But clung, and drifted—we knew not where.

“And oft, as out of the depths we swung  
To the shifting summits, and pois’d, and hung,  
For a breathless moment, pinnacled high,  
I searched the line of the sea and sky  
For sign of the Valkyr.—And once, it seem’d,  
Far, in a dazzle of sun that stream’d,  
Like fiery rain, from a crater’s rift,



I mark'd a white sail flutter and shift,  
And dip.—Or was it a sea-bird's wing?  
—Cataract-like was the downward fling  
And crash of the surge; but the woman lay,  
Silent ever, with limbs asway;  
And never the eyes of Leif from mine  
Swerv'd, or fail'd of their baleful shine.

“Like the eyes of the serpent, that venom'd still,  
Gaze on the slayer, and blast, and kill,  
Though the brain be crush'd in the crafty head,  
They held me in wonder—and half in dread.  
But slowly, slowly the oozing gore  
Sapped his vitals; and more and more  
His spent breast labor'd.—I read the sign;  
And I said in my heart, ‘She shall soon be mine!’—  
Though I reck'd not how, and I reck'd not where,  
Till in our drifting I grew aware  
That the long-drawn, deafening, doleful wail,  
And thresh of the wave-tops seem'd to fail;  
And the sea, like a giant that strives with death,  
Heav'd its breast for a deeper breath.

“Far, on the glimmering verge I saw  
A mighty, mountainous wave updraw—  
Foamless, soundless, gathering strength,  
And slowly ridging its monstrous length,  
Till the wan half-light, from the yellowing West,



Was tinged with the green of its curling crest.  
And Leif, too, saw; and the sickly hue  
Of the Terror smote him—for well he knew  
All that it boded. He gasped, and rear'd;  
And the life-drops trickled from brow and beard,  
As he bent above her.—She turn'd her face,  
Wan and wild, from his last embrace.  
Hunggrily did he look on her,  
Striving to speak, with his lips astir;  
But he made no sound.—And I stretch'd my hand,  
And smiled—and she could but understand:—  
'Choose! To whom wilt thou now belong?—  
Unto the wise? or unto the strong?'  
Over her head she saw the wall  
Of the green sea toppling to its fall;  
Knew—and shudder'd to feel—the touch  
Of Death, in his drowning fingers' clutch;  
And suddenly, swiftly, making choice,  
With heaving body, and strangling voice,  
She tore herself from his grasp apart,  
And caught, and clasp'd me—and heart to heart  
I held her fast.—Like a soul accurst,  
Shriek'd the other. The great wave burst—  
Whelm'd him—shatter'd him. Hands upthrown,  
Down he sank, with bubble and groan.  
—And all in a moment, toss'd on high,  
From a staggering spar that raked the sky,  
I saw the flag of the Valkyr fly.



“ Mine!—from battle, and storm, and wreck!  
White she lay on the Valkyr’s deck,  
As the foam-flake whipt from the dashing spray,  
That scarce alights and is whirl’d away.  
But I wrapp’d her close in her riddled gown,  
And hard beside her I cast me down;  
As the Valkyr spun to the wind, and reel’d  
Down the slope of the great salt field,  
Homeward, bearing her priceless spoil.  
—Into the night and the black turmoil  
Of the North we dipp’d; with the baying pack  
Of the sail-dogs scurrying on our track;  
And the white-maned, thunderous steeds of Ran  
Galloping wide, in the rear and van,  
With cries, and clashings, and neighings loud—  
Wind, and billow, and ship, and cloud,  
Blowing, and flowing, and sounding on—  
Till, in the darkness before the dawn,  
We heard before us the deeper roar  
Of the racing tides of the tide-ways four,  
Trampling the Skerries’ threshing-floor.

“ Hard to windward we toiled, and beat,  
With straining oar, and with sagging sheet,  
And the dismal flap of the quaking sail;  
And many a bearded lip grew pale,  
For death was under our very lee.  
But the woman!—never a sign gave she.





With closed eyes, limp in my arms, and lost  
To the strife about her, as when she toss'd  
On the vast mid-deep, she seem'd to wait,  
All unheeding, the cast of fate.  
Motionless, dumb, and heedless still,  
As we drew by the foreland's frowning hill,  
And weather'd the Jotun's Tooth, and won  
To the harbor's mouth, at the rise of sun;  
And saw, and greeted, with cheer on cheer,  
The peaceful strand, and the mirror'd pier,  
And the smoke from the roof-trees curling clear!

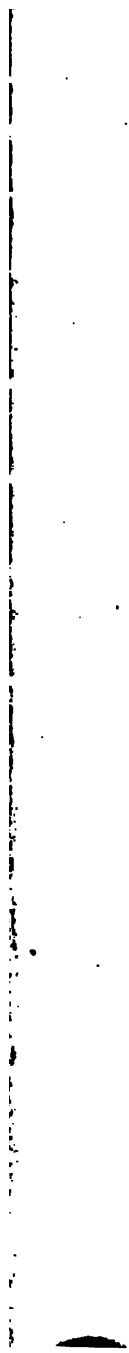
“Then, if ever, my heart was glad.  
Mine!—And drunk with the joy I had,  
To think that now from the wrath of man,  
And the raging seas, and the Aesir's ban,  
I held her safe, with a mighty cry,  
Bidding her look on the haven nigh,  
I seized her up.—But she writhed, and brake  
Out of my arms, like a curling snake!  
Swift, and supple, and blinding fair,  
Reft of her wrapping, she faced me there;  
And beat me backward, maniac-wise;  
And combing the long locks from her eyes,  
She look'd on the land, and she look'd on me,  
And backward once to the crying sea.—  
Never a hand did I think to raise  
To stop or stay her. In sheer amazè,



I watch'd, and wonder'd; and ere I caught  
A gleam or a glimpse of her woman's thought,  
Low she crouch'd—'tis the truth, I swear  
By the Hammer of Thor!—and even there—  
There, but a bow-shot from the land"—  
And he struck the board with his heavy hand—  
"There, as it were from the very shore,  
Straight to the death she had fear'd before,  
Leap'd, and flash'd—and was seen no more.

"Now!—will ye solve me that?" quoth he.  
And the graybeards answer'd—and why not we?—  
"Ah! what riddles these women be!"

WILLIAM YOUNG.







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